Parenthood
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Exodus 20:1-17
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In one sense, there is no more popular subject than motherhood. Mother's Day is a nostalgic kind of day when all of us, I suppose, find ourselves remembering, reminiscing, and wishing that somehow things could be like they used to be. Our options on this day are to celebrate the past or deal with the present. And to do the latter: to deal honestly with motherhood today is to acknowledge that we are in a changing and somewhat ominous historical situation. It is to acknowledge that responsible parenthood is a matter of tremendous importance and seven difficulty in a way it has never been before.

At the risk of sounding like a male chauvinist I shall, in this sermon, use the term "parenthood"; simultaneously wishing all a "Happy Mother's Day" and then asking you to think with me about the whole business of being mothers and fathers and children - that is to say, families - in the year of our Lord 1971.

Dr. Albert Outler, Professor of Theology at Southern Methodist University recently remarked that the established institutions of our culture are experiencing the sociological equivalent of a nervous breakdown. Government, the courts, law enforcement, education, the church; and among them, if not at the top of the list, the family. The crisis of the American family is reflected, I believe, in the sheer volume of printed material which is addressed to the topic. Magazine articles, books, "how to do it" manuals, newspaper columms, add up to a deluge of frantic advice, all of which assumes that the family is in deep trouble.

From the extremist fringes of our culture - and I don't mind calling some of them lunatic - we are advised on the one hand that motherhood and the family are the oppressive tools of a male-imperialist culture, and that a liberated female will be granted abortion on demand; if she bears a child through some unfortunate sequence of events, she will plunk him in a state

child-care center while she drives her semi - which exercise is euphemistically called "liberation". On the other hand, we are advised that what our culture really needs is a return to the Victorian standards of discipline, which in the 19th century were called "Child Management"; that the best thing we can do for children is teach them obedience - highly recommended, by the way, by Adolf Hitler; and that somehow we are in a family crisis because of a gentle physician by the name of Spock, who made the fatal error of opposing the Viet Nam war and since has become the favorite scape goat for the people who haven't the foggiest notion of what he really said in his book.

That's on the fringe, but in the middle we are dealing with a different situation in terms of mobility which overloads the nuclear family with emotional fright, something called a generation gap, and a real conflict in values. It all adds up, I believe, to a crucial turning point for the family as an institution, and an added responsibility on all of us who must be parents. That, by way of introduction.

I would begin by holding up before you the singular importance of the family. I sense that many of us simply don't know, or are unwilling to acknowledge, the tremendous importance of our roles in the family. When you call the family into question: when you suggest structural change in the family as the basic societal unit, you are dealing with the very bed-rock of human civilization. I read, this morning from the 20th chapter of the book of Exodus: the Ten Cammandments. There "honoring Parents" is established as one of the essentials in a life lived in harmony with God's will: no less important than not killing or stealing. As Christians - as people informed by the Bible - parenthood and the family are essential parts of God's economy.

One doesn't have to look far for the evidence to document that affirmation. Illustrations are plentiful. Let me share two that I found interesting. A study done several years ago at Bellevue Hospital in New York by Dr. Lauretta Bender, conclusively proved that nothing can substitute adequately for a

family. That is why, by the way, welfare departments do everything possible to place wards in Foster Homes rather than institutions. That is why, in our community, the matter of the use of Cary Home is so vitally important. It has been seriously proposed that we simply ought to fill up Cary Home with children - even though every available bit of knowledge tells us that a mediocre foster home is better for the child than an insitutuion.

A second illustration. During the London Blitz in World War II, there was a concerted effort to evacuate children under five and place them in institutions or relatives' homes in the countryside. After the war studies were made and when the results were in they revealed that the children who had remained with their mothers and had gone through the incomparable horror of the bombings were somehow in better mental health than those who were evacuated. [J. C. Wynn, How Christian Parents Face Family Problems, p. 19-20]

That says something about the importance of parenthood and families. It also says something to me about our tendency to move the children out in a time of family crisis.

Parents are important, because in the complex of relationships that make up a family teaching and learning are always happening. We might wish that it were otherwise - that we could find times to escape that particular responsibility, but it cannot be done. In a little volume "The Art of Teaching" Dr. Gilbert Highet puts it succinctly: "It is impossible to have children without teaching them. Beat them, coddle them, ignore them, force-feed them, shun them or worry about them, love them or hate them, you are still teaching them something, all the time."

That is to say - we teach positively, intentionally, consciously, or negatively, unintentionally, unconsciously; and parents who understand that, it seems to me, are doing the better job of it. What we are teaching is a value system. Children becmme pretty much what we have taught them to become. Their values are what they have derived from their parents - and it can be

positive or negative, depending entirely on the parents.

There is something frightening about that, and before the situation looks totally grim, let me hasten to add the other side of it. Family counselors always say that most parents are doing a pretty fair job. The really bad parent is a newsworthy item. And on more than one occasion I've heard responsible experts advise parents to stop worring so much. In my mind, it is no better to be consumed by a sense of repponsibility to ones children than it is to ignore them. Ogden Nash said it well:

"Children aren't happy with nothing to ignore
So that's what parents were created for."

Which is another way of saying that parents are persons too, and that perhaps nothing is so healthy as regular periods of benign ignoring - such as a few days alone for the sake of self and marriage.

The family is important, Biblically, socially, personally. Looking at the overview, the family seems to be mystically indestructable. But it is, today, in a peculiarly difficult time, and there are peculiarly difficult problems to confront. Let's look at two very broad ones.

First, the traditional functions of the family - the cement that held parents and children together - have disappeared. The functions once performed in the home are now the responsibility of outside institutions, namely school, church, T.V. and peer group. The result is that many homes are reduced to what one observer called a "combination youth hostel and laundromat". The school demands a near total commitment in terms of time, and the sheer amount of hours involved means that school does what parents used to do. The church, it is assumed, is the institution that will make children into Christians. Which means that we give to the Church School class and teacher the responsibility that was exercised by parents alone for thousands of years. There were, after all, no Sunday Schools until the 19th century. And television: the average American 17 year old has watched somewhere in the vincinity o

17,000 hours of T.V. Dr. Douglas Heath, Professor of Psychology at Haverford College says bluntly that this is one of the most important social science statistics of the last several decades. 17,000 hours. 17,000 hours taken from other activities, mostly social, many of them family oriented. 17,000 hours in which children would have been learning the art of playing with others, or devising ways to play alone, or exploring the world.

The first difficulty about parenthood is that our functions have been assumed by someone else. The second, and more severe - in the mind, is that we seem to have on our hands a very real crisis between adults and young people. Call it the Generation Gap if you wish, the fact is that there is a barrier of hostility between us that colors and influences our attitudes, behavior and relationships. I've talked with parents who seem not to like their children - or any children for that matter. Now, I'm not talking about the normal irritations with one's own flesh and blood. There are times when you can't stand your own children, and when children can't stand their parents. I'm talking about something deeper that is in the air: something ominous and destructive.

James Michner has written a book entitled: Kent State, What Happened and Why. According to the Time Magazine review [5-3-71], "The most startling and depressing passages . . . are not those about the killing of four students, . . . but those wherein he records the hate and anger - against a whole student generation - that surfaced afterward." The author quotes a high school teacher: "Anyone who appears on the streets of a city like Kent with long hair, dirty clothes or barefooted deserves to be shot." And a mother talking to her daughter: "It would have been better for America if every student on that hill would have been shot." Daughter, "Mother! I was there. Only a miracle of some kind saved me." Mother: "You would have deserved it."

I've heard that kind of talk - that deep hatred. Where did it come from? What brought us to this situation in which parents eject their children from the home and then feel proud of their courage? The depths of this crisis are staked out in the lives of 60,000 young men - living in Canada, because their

country, their communities, their churches, and in many cases, their families - have not stood with them, nor heard them, nor respected them: just rejected them.

I don't have answers. But I do have an accute sensitivity - better described as a sharp pain where I live - that responsible parents must wake up to the new situation of the 1970's: that the future of our civilization may very well depend on individual parents recovering their parental functions and dealing with that hostility that continues to tear us apart.

Now some suggestions or goals: based on a Biblical understanding of man, and here offered - not as expert advice, but shared in the context of the job all of us are trying to do - and in which we need the help, support, wisdom and prayers of each other.

The Bible views man as a child of God, of inestimable worth, the object of God's love and the recipient of the grace of Jesus Christ. In terms of parenthood I think this means that our job is to instill confidence and self-esteem: to tell and show a child that he is loved, respected and valued for what he is, and not only when he performs according to our standards.

Coming at it negatively it means, don't use your children for the sake of your own ego: don't make grades, athletic prowess, musical proficiency the means by which a child perceives he can win your love.

It means, don't abuse your child. Don't ever belittle him. I know of families in which parents play a deadly little game with their children and find it amusing. Whenever the child tries something and fails - whether batting a ball or simply walking across the room without stumbling the parent will criticise and belittle and in so doing cut the bottom out of any sense of worth and esteem the child might have.

It means, don't indulge: don't get caught in the myth that because you didn't have it, your child is going to get it, regardless of what it costs. That's just a subtle way of using children, and tells them, eloquently, that

they aren't important enough to say "no" to.

Confidence and Self Esteem. That's number one. In the Bible, parents are given the responsibility of teaching values. That's number two. But realize that what you are comes across far more clearly than what you say. Beware of that double standard - in which all of us sometimes find ourselves: i.e. telling your child that he must always be honest, and then asking him to tell someone you're not home when you don't want to take a phone call. That's fatal, and it applies to sexuality, integrity, respect for others, loyalty to country. The values you live by are what gets transmitted, regardless of what you say.

Number three - in the context of the Christian faith, parents make promises about raising children in the "nurture and admonition of the Lord." The responsibility for conveying the Good News of the Gospel is yours, not alone - but primarily. The Church School is a resource to help you and your child. But if the only time he hears the name Jesus Christ, the only time he sees a Bible, the only time he prays, is on an occasional Sunday morning, the job will not be accomplished. To raise a child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord is first of all to have him here on Sunday morning, to be here with him: it is, second, to pray with him and for him: to read the Bible with him: to acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ in ways that convey its importance.

There are grave risks in parenthood. And perhaps gavest of all is that we will succeed. In a very touching article in Presbyterian Life, a father writes about a son who deserted the army. "Did I teach my son too much? Or not enough?" That's really the vital question. To be a responsible parent is one day to cut the strings and step aside as the person you have molded stands alone with confidence and values and faith.

And along the way it requires intelligent love, acceptance, forgiveness - in a word Grace.

So - "Happy Mother's Day!" , and may the Grace of Jesus Christ be with us all. Amen.